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Pakistan, the Other Rogue Nation

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In November 2003, shortly after Libya offered to open its nuclear facilities to international inspection, it became public knowledge that Abdul Qadeer Khan, the "father" of the Pakistani bomb, had been deeply involved in peddling nuclear weapons designs and technology to Libya, Iran, and North Korea. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf initially denied any Pakistani involvement in these dealings. However, within days of his initial denials he was forced to confront Khan's extensive role in this clandestine nuclear commerce. In February 2004, President Musharraf induced the scientist to publicly apologize for his actions, and then proceeded to pardon him.

As Pakistan's investigation into Khan's illegal activities proceeds, Pakistani authorities, and their American counterparts, have been at pains to suggest that this vast subterranean nuclear network was the product of individual malfeasance and little else. Carefully orchestrated statements from Islamabad have sought to create the impression that mere greed drove Khan to pursue this deadly trade. The US State Department, normally a vocal supporter of export controls and nonproliferation policies, has mostly maintained a studious silence. Administration spokespersons at the highest levels have also done little to dispel the notion that the Pakistani military was an innocent bystander as Khan plied his trade with two key members of President George W. Bush's "axis of evil."

But all this leaves unanswered a central question: are the proffered explanations credible? Could these widespread nuclear transfers have taken place without the knowledge and acquiescence of Pakistan's behemoth military establishment? Was money the sole motivation for the diffusion of these weapons technologies? Were these acts of proliferation utterly unrelated to the Pakistani military's relentless quest for nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles? And why has the Bush administration been so willing to accept this anodyne explanation about these insidious nuclear transfers?

A TORTURED NUCLEAR HISTORY

The explanations Islamabad has trotted out, and to which Washington has provided a formal nod, strain credulity. The vast network of nuclear transfers did not result from a single individual's greed and malfeasance. The diffusion of nuclear technology that emanated from Pakistan was inextricably intertwined with the warp and woof of the country's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. To unravel this complex relationship it is necessary to briefly explore the tangled history of Pakistan's quest for nuclear arms.

The Pakistani nuclear weapons program began in 1972 when, following Pakistan's overwhelming military defeat at India's hands the year before, Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto initiated the program as a strategic counter to India's substantial conventional military superiority. After Bhutto's incarceration, and subsequent death, at the hands of a military dictatorship headed by General Zia ul-Haq, control of the nuclear weapons program shifted strictly to the military establishment. Even with the restoration of civilian rule the military refused to part control over the nuclear estate. For example, under Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto (who succeeded General Zia when Pakistan returned to civilian rule in 1988), the military so zealously guarded its nuclear secrets that Bhutto only learned the extent of Pakistan's progress with nuclear weapons on a state visit to the United States.

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Earlier, under General Zia's regime, Pakistan had made yeoman progress on its nuclear weapons program through a dexterous policy of deceit, dissembling, and outright theft. In 1975, Khan, then an unknown Pakistani metallurgist, decamped from the Netherlands with blueprints for centrifuges from the Dutch component of the European uranium-enrichment consortium URENCO, where he had been employed. Once he surfaced in Pakistan he was embraced as a national hero. Over the next several decades he played an integral role in the enriching of uranium to weapons-grade levels at his sprawling nuclear complex at Kahuta.

During the 1980s, the Reagan administration did little to stop Pakistan's attempts to acquire nuclear weapons capabilities. Earlier, during the Carter administration, Pakistan had been the subject of much American opprobrium because of the execrable human rights record of the Zia-ul-Haq military regime and its determined pursuit of nuclear weapons. With the 1978 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Zia regime's fortunes changed dramatically. Because of Pakistan's significant role in the prosecution of the war against the Soviet occupation, US officials during the 1980s looked the other way while Islamabad accelerated its quest for nuclear weapons.

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The reliance on Pakistan to aid the Afghan mujahideen not only led the United States to all but suspend its Pakistani nonproliferation efforts, but also saw it provide Pakistan with substantial amounts of advanced weaponry. Proponents of this policy argued that the provision of such weaponry to Pakistan's military would assuage the country's security anxieties and thereby curb its quest for nuclear weapons. Instead, the Pakistani military cynically pursued its nuclear weapons program while extracting as much security assistance from the United States as possible.

American policymakers proved equally craven when Pakistan's strategic utility ended. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the US State Department promptly failed to certify that Pakistan did "not possess a nuclear explosive device." As a result, under the terms of the Pressler Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act, the United States was compelled to impose sanctions. The substantial arms assistance to Pakistan drew to an abrupt halt. The Pakistani civilian government of Prime Minister Bhutto bitterly protested this about-face in US policy but to no avail; the sanctions on Pakistan remained in place. Sanctions, however, did little to retard the progress of the Pakistani nuclear weapons program.

THE CHINA SYNDROME

With the United States abjuring engagement with Pakistan, the People's Republic of China became all the more important. China has been a longtime and, most important, unwaveringly reliable ally of Pakistan over the past four decades. In its search for the appropriate delivery vehicles for its nuclear weapons, the Pakistani military turned to this all-weather friend. Although notionally committed to the US-sponsored program to limit ballistic missile proliferation known as the Missile Technology Control Regime, China proved both able and willing to transfer the requisite ballistic missile technology to Pakistan. Earlier it had provided Pakistan with substantial assistance on the design of a nuclear weapon. China's willingness to supply these technologies, most notably the M-11 missile, with a flight range of 451 miles, had one compelling motivation: to build Pakistan up as a strategic surrogate against India in South Asia.

When China's blatant transfer of ballistic missile technologies to Pakistan piqued the American nonproliferation community in the early 1990s, the United States reluctantly imposed limited sanctions on both China and Pakistan. The sanctions on China were restricted to the particular "entities" that were involved in proliferation activities. They also proved to be of limited duration. Despite the sanctions, Chinese officials publicly denied that any transfers had taken place. Privately, they assured the United States that they would end their assistance to Pakistan.

These assurances notwithstanding, the technology transfers did not end. Thanks to Chinese assistance during the closing decade of the century, Pakistan managed to develop a modest but viable nuclear weapons program replete with a range of short- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles, some sent directly from China's client, North Korea. The military establishment, working in concert with Khan and his associates, had managed to undermine, subvert, and circumvent the emerging global nonproliferation regime. In May 1998, within two weeks after India carried out nuclear tests, Pakistan

also crossed the nuclear Rubicon with its own tests. Although further and costly American sanctions soon followed, Pakistan's politico-military leadership refused to contain its nuclear weapons program.

In the aftermath of the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests in 1998, China reassessed its arms transfers policies to the region. At one level, China wanted to seize the moral high ground in an attempt to upbraid its upstart neighbor—India—for testing nuclear weapons. To pursue this goal, however, it needed to assure the United States that it was no longer a rogue proliferator of ballistic missile technologies.

As the Chinese connection diminished, the Pakistani military and nuclear establishments were forced to turn to another source, namely North Korea. Isolated in the global order and seeking to fabricate its own nuclear weapons, North Korea was able to offer Pakistan the technologies that the latter so badly wanted. The interests of these two desperate states neatly dovetailed. Pakistan could provide centrifuge technology in exchange for access to North Korean ballistic missile technology. This alliance of convenience blossomed and expanded into the new century.

America's deafening silence

Ironically, at the cold war's end the United States expended considerable time, attention, and money to try to prevent unemployed nuclear scientists from the former Soviet Union from offering their deadly wares and their skills to the highest bidder. Much of this effort was accomplished under the aegis of the Nunn-Lugar program, named after the erstwhile senior Democratic senator from Georgia, Sam Nunn, and the current chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Republican Richard Lugar from Indiana. Yet, while the United States was fixated on nuclear seepage from the former Soviet Union, the tentacles of a hydra-headed monster were spreading out in numerous directions from the self-described "most allied ally" of the United States, Pakistan.

There is little question that ultimate responsibility for the dispersal of nuclear technology from Pakistan rests squarely with the Pakistani military, which continues to be the sole guardian of the country's nuclear weapons program. Critical choices made by America, however, must also be adduced to explain the failure to stop the growth, expansion, and success of this nuclear network. As was noted, the United States did little to curb Pakistan's fervid efforts to obtain nuclear weapons during the Zia years. In addition, as the University of Chicago's Alyssa Ayres has argued, the Pakistani army under General Zia's tutelage extended its sway into a range of areas normally within the sphere of the civilian administration. This creeping militarization of the Pakistani state and society did not elicit even the mildest of rebukes from the United States.

As long as the Pakistani military allowed America to use Pakistan as a staging ground for the prosecution of the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, the United States was prepared to countenance General Zia's insidious transformation of Pakistan's domestic political arrangements. When Pakistan's strategic significance ended in 1990, President George H. W. Bush's administration disengaged from Pakistan and imposed a raft of sanctions.

The administration did little or nothing, however, to bolster Pakistan's fledgling democracy through targeted economic assistance. As a result, despite the notional return to democratic rule following General Zia's death in an airplane crash in 1988, the Pakistani military managed to zealously guard its institutional and political prerogatives. The existence of an executive president who could dismiss prime ministers at will, usually on the advice of the army chief, gave the military wide extra-constitutional powers. More to the point, the military continued to consume at least a third of the national budget and maintained firm control over the nuclear weapons program.

US policy toward Pakistan did not undergo a fundamental change until the waning days of the Clinton presidency. The Clinton administration had many grievances against Musharraf, who had come to power following the overthrow of the incompetent, corrupt, and unstable government of Nawaz Sharif. The US was distressed at his coup, his role in the 1999 war against India—General Musharraf is widely referred to as its "architect"—his unwillingness to contain the nuclear weapons program, and his continued support for the scrofulous Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Indeed, Bill Clinton pointedly snubbed Musharraf with a five-hour stopover in Pakistan after he had spent over five days in India on his sole presidential visit to South Asia.

The Bush administration might well have continued the Clinton policies of isolating Pakistan were it not for the events of September 11, 2001. Again Pakistan's strategic geography proved a desirable asset for the United States. Amazingly, the new Bush administration promptly absolved General Musharraf of his many misdeeds in its quest to eviscerate Al Qaeda and demolish the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The plethora of sanctions

that had been imposed was swiftly lifted, and military and economic assistance once again poured into Pakistan. As in the past, the administration made few demands on General Musharraf's military regime for reform. A deeply flawed election in 2002 that helped bring a number of Islamic religious parties to power elicited virtually no adverse comment from the US State Department. With America's seeming imprimatur, the Musharraf regime was able to pursue its deadly nuclear commerce with impunity. Even the American discovery in July 2002 of a Pakistani air force C-130 flying to and from Pyongyang brought only a mild criticism from the State Department.

The deafening silence from the State and Defense Departments on the most recent revelations regarding Pakistan's continuing involvement in this deadly commerce is characteristic of American policy toward Pakistan and other allies of convenience. Despite substantial circumstantial evidence that links the Musharraf regime to some of these technology and weapons transfers, the Bush administration has shown little or no willingness to upbraid the general. Instead, it appears content to have Khan serve as a convenient scapegoat for the genuine malfeasances of the Pakistani military.

Closing the nuclear bazaar

If the United States hopes to end this clandestine nuclear trade, it will have to adopt a new set of policies toward the Pakistani military regime. Without a significant policy shift the United States will simply fail to shut down the nuclear bazaar.

American policy makers must realize that General Musharraf needs the United States as badly, if not worse, than the United States needs him. Just before 9-11, Pakistan was teetering on the brink of a large-scale financial default to multilateral lending institutions. The American economic largesse lavished on the regime in the aftermath of 9-11 (about $3 billion over five years) enabled it to stave off financial disaster. Today US economic assistance provides critical life support to the nearly moribund Pakistani economy. Consequently, the United States should be in a position to drastically shape the Pakistani military's long-term choices.

It is also important to demolish a popular contention that significant US pressure on the Pakistani military establishment to reorder its priorities would lead to its imminent collapse and the emergence of a radical, viscerally anti-American Islamist regime. Instead, it is the seemingly uncritical American coddling of yet another squalid dictator that is generating much popular anti-Americanism within Pakistan. General Musharraf and his acolytes and their ardent supporters in the United States have propagated a base canard that he and his regime are indispensable to the pursuit of US interests in the region. Ironically, it was Musharraf's cultivation of the Islamist political parties and his untrammeled hostility toward the two established political parties, the Pakistan Muslim League and the Pakistan People's Party, that contributed to the current political ascendance of Islamic forces in Pakistan. Despite the threats to his regime from radical Islamists, the vast majority of the Pakistani army remains firmly in Musharraf's corner.

Given the existence of significant American leverage over Pakistan and the low probability of an Islamist takeover, it is in the interest of the United States to prod the Pakistani military to return to its barracks. Without this pressure Pakistan will not see a restoration of viable civilian institutions and the military will inevitably return to its trade in nuclear wares in the global bazaar. Only the gradual but firm restoration of robust civilian and democratic institutions within Pakistan can repair the rule of law within that hapless country. With the military taking on a bloated, extra-constitutional role, any notion of accountability over clandestine operations—whether involving support to Islamic zealots or the dubious transfers of nuclear technology—will not prevail. In the absence of any domestic mechanism of such accountability, scrutiny, or control, the military, which has long benefited from these questionable endeavors, will have little or no incentive to alter its time-honored practices.

Shifting political authority to legitimate, democratic institutions will require a serious, long-term American engagement with Pakistan. Any strategy that falls short of this commitment will merely amount to a palliative and fail to redress the institutional pathology that ails Pakistan. Most important, failure could also contribute to reconstitution of the global nuclear bazaar. A democratically elected government could, over time, embark upon the difficult but necessary process of establishing much-needed civilian oversight over Pakistan's nuclear program. ■